



# Reclaiming History



By Hamdan Taha

narrative of Zionism. Predominant for decades, the Israeli narrative tends to give overwhelming priority to Jewish heritage in Palestine and to withhold and suppress Palestine's non-Jewish and Arab history. Biblical colonial archaeology has used its results to fabricate a mythic past of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine that was used to seize Palestinian territory, expel Palestinians from their land and properties, and forge a false story of themselves as victims in this region. But as the Palestinian areas are occupied territories and as such subject to international humanitarian law, the International Conference on the Archaeology of the Near East, held in Rome in 1998, affirmed its commitment to the UNESCO charter that, pertaining to excavations in occupied territories, stipulates that the occupying power is prohibited from conducting archaeological excavation in occupied territories.

Starting in August 1994, I served as director of the Department of Antiquities and led the process of managing the handover of the offices that until then had been part of the Israeli Civil Administration. There were only a few staff working in a handful of offices; previously, their main responsibility had been to follow up on licensing issues and to serve as an operational base for the Israeli antiquities officer. The department had to overcome the negative connotations archaeology had among Palestinians because they associated its work with the occupation, as Israel had used antiquities as a pretext to confiscate land for settlement purposes. Many settlements have been established on the back of archaeological excavation campaigns, such as Khirbet Siloun, Mount Gerizim, Tell Rumeida, and others.

The new situation after the Interim Agreement allowed Palestinians to write the history of Palestine on the basis of its primary sources, a privilege reserved until recently for foreign and Israeli archaeologists. Today, Palestinian archaeologists strive to engage in a new paradigm of post-colonial cooperation – despite the obstacles posed by the occupation.



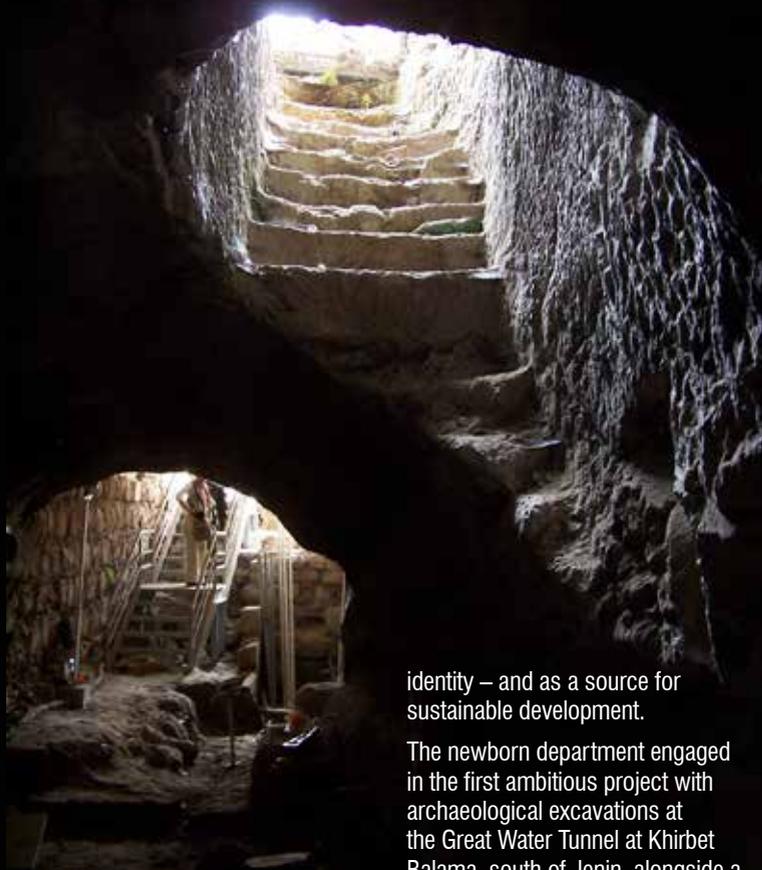
The establishment of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities in 1994 was a momentous event, as it inaugurated the revival of the Department of Antiquities, established in 1920, that had been dissolved on account of the *Nakba*. It thus marked an official reclaiming of history.

According to the 1993 Oslo Agreements, Palestinians were given control in several administrative domains, including archaeology, in the areas newly designated A and B. There was an understanding that responsibilities in Area C would be transferred gradually to Palestinians by May 1999. But this mutually agreed-upon timetable was never honored by Israel. In the absence of a final peace agreement, Israel remains a military occupier in the Palestinian territories, with responsibilities set out in internal law. Operating under a situation of occupation, archaeology in Palestine thus has been and to some extent remains an arena for the struggle between two competing narratives: an indigenous Palestinian narrative and the settler-colonial

The new era of formal archaeology in Palestine began with a small but dedicated and enthusiastic team that worked out of a field office near the ruins of the ancient Hisham's Palace in Jericho. Despite its minimal resources, it considered itself a natural extension of the Mandate-era Department of Antiquities that had ceased to exist in 1948. The department aimed to promote a modern understanding of cultural heritage in Palestine. The situation after Oslo allowed Palestinians to write the history of Palestine based on its primary sources – a privilege reserved previously for foreign and Israeli archaeologists. Fieldwork activities began on a small



Reviving Palestinian archaeology, 1994: installing signage at Hisham's Palace, Jericho.



site in Jericho known as Jiser Abu Ghabush, under the blazing August sun. The team felt empowered as they were now in charge of their own archaeological sites and writing their own past.

As the department's founding vision emphasized archaeology as a scientific enterprise, its responsibilities included formulating new legislation, training staff in salvage excavation, combating the looting of archaeological sites and illicit trade in antiquities, and building a museum sector. Aiming to safeguard the integrity of different aspects and layers of cultural heritage, the department recognized the importance of antiquities as an integral part of our national cultural

identity – and as a source for sustainable development.

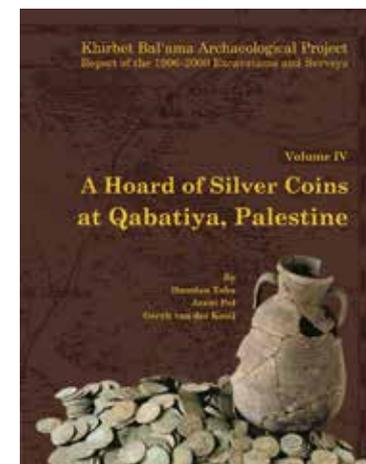
The newborn department engaged in the first ambitious project with archaeological excavations at the Great Water Tunnel at Khirbet Balama, south of Jenin, alongside a large cluster of tombs from various periods. They recovered an ancient water system that had provided the inhabitants of Jenin city with access to spring water at the base of the mound and was designed primarily to be used in times of war and siege. The water tunnel is one of five major water systems built since the Bronze and Iron ages in Palestine that have been discovered so far. Such great water systems also existed in Jerusalem, Abu Shushe (Gezer), El-Jib (Gebion), and Tell el-Mutesselim (Megiddo); they were generally connected with major urban centers and reflect a sophisticated knowledge of engineering principles.

The water tunnel system of Khirbet Bal'ama.

One of the most notable discoveries in the adjacent tombs was the Qabatiya silver coinage collection. The hoard includes coins from eight European countries and demonstrates the extensive cultural and commercial relationships that existed between Palestine and Europe during the Ottoman period.

In our subsequent projects, we gave priority to cleaning up around one hundred archaeological sites and to developing sites that had been excavated and abandoned by previous archaeological missions that had transferred archaeological materials and excavation archives to various European and American museums. The reassessment work of these archaeological sites not only aimed to interpret archaeological evidence objectively but also rehabilitated these sites as archaeological parks, such as in Tell es-Sultan near Jericho, that was inhabited by Natufian hunter-gatherers 10,000 years ago, with permanent structures being built more than 9,000 years ago, the site remaining in use throughout the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, Pottery Neolithic, Bronze, and Iron ages until it was abandoned in the sixth century BC after it had been destroyed during the Persian invasion.

The new situation increasingly allowed the department to engage in a new paradigm of post-colonial cooperation. Although Palestine is still under occupation, excavation permits were replaced by memoranda of understanding that reflect equality and mutual respect, and the colonial principle of appropriating archaeological materials was abolished. Whereas previous biblical research in Palestine generally aimed to confirm the historicity of the biblical accounts as a way to justify Zionist



colonial claims – and undermine Palestinian history – the new research is motivated by the study of the broad spectrum of past cultures. The results of these joint excavations were interpreted with objective scientific parameters rather than for ideological and political purposes and aim to write an inclusive narrative of history rather than a Zionist exclusive narrative.

Prof. Paolo Matthiae of the University of Rome La Sapienza was the first to propose joint excavations at Tell es-Sultan in Jericho. Soon followed joint excavations with Leiden University, the Netherlands, in Khirbet Bal'ama (Jenin) and at Tell Balata (Nablus). Tell Balata features a Canaanite urban center that is identified with ancient Shikmu (Shechem). The site was inhabited as early as 6,000 years ago and reached its zenith in the Middle Bronze Age. The tell was excavated by several archaeological expeditions throughout the last century, but the site was left unattended during the Israeli occupation. The project was mainly concerned with the rehabilitation of the neglected



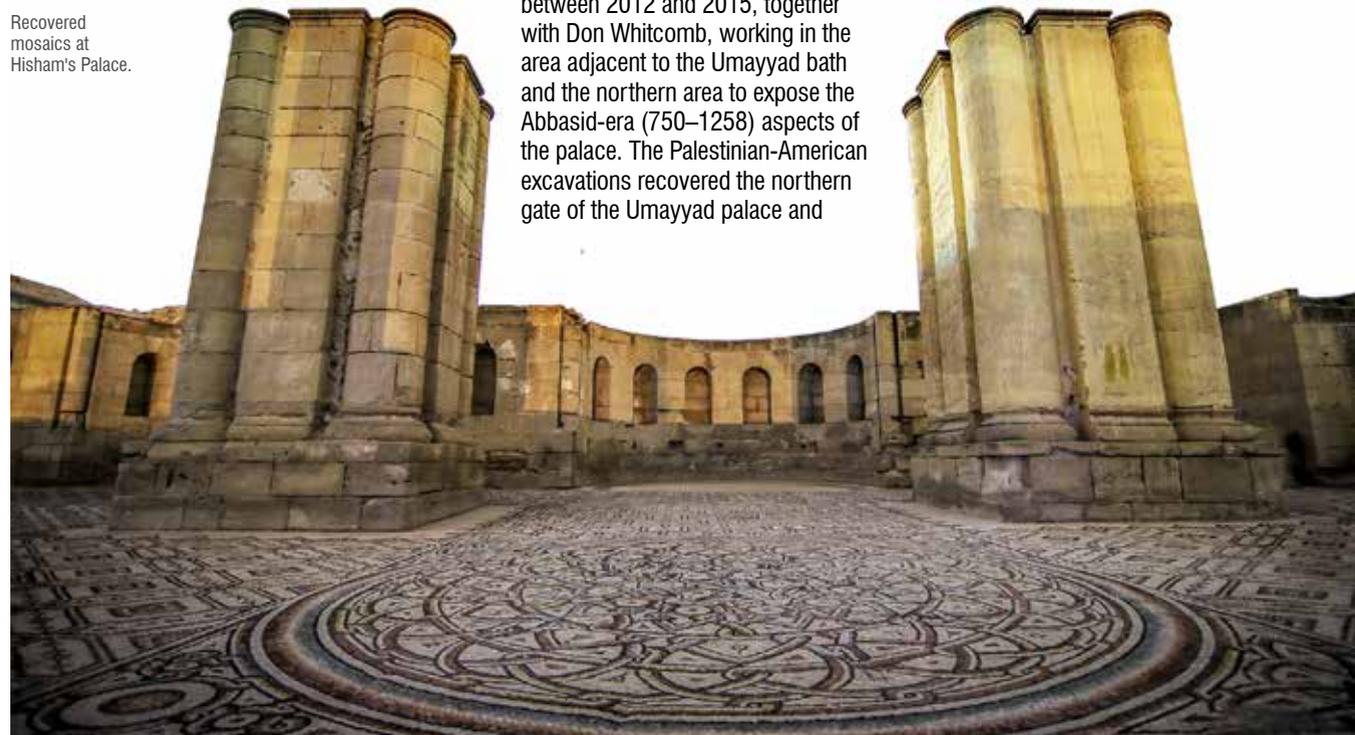
Tell Balata, Nablus. Photo courtesy of Palestinian Assembly for Photography and Exploration.

archaeological site and developed it into a modern archaeological park, providing it with an interpretation center, signage, walking paths, and leaflets for the benefit of the local community and foreign visitors.

Palestinian-French excavations took place in Tell al-Blakhiya in Gaza that has been identified with the ancient harbor city of Anthedon and mentioned in the Islamic period under the name of Tida. Archaeological remains from the Iron Age and the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods were uncovered here. The city was inhabited from the ninth century BC to the eleventh century AD. Also located in Gaza, a human settlement at Tell Um Amer, near Al-Nuseirat village, was established in the Roman period along Wadi Gaza, close to the seashore. It appears on the sixth-century Madaba map under the name of Tabatha. The site contains the ruins of the monastery of St. Hilarion (born in 291 AD), the founder of monastic life in Gaza. The monastery comprises two churches, a burial site, a baptism hall, and dining rooms; its floors are decorated with colored mosaics that feature plants and animal scenes. Tell es-Sakan in Gaza, located on the southern bank of Wadi Gaza, features a Canaanite city from the early Bronze Age that was a major fort on the ancient route to Egypt and Arabia.

Palestinian-Norwegian excavations at Tell al-Mafjar on the northern bank of Wadi Nueima near Jericho have recovered a major Chalcolithic settlement that enriches the cultural history of Jericho. A rich assemblage of stone tools and vessels, pottery vessels, terracotta animal figurines, and animal bones has been recovered, indicating an agricultural settlement. Palestinian-Russian excavations at the Sycamore Tree site in Jericho revealed an important area of human occupation that from the fifth to the early eighth centuries

Recovered mosaics at Hisham's Palace.



formed part of the Byzantine city center of Jericho.

In Khirbet al-Mafjar near Jericho, also known as Hisham's Palace, an early Islamic palace served as an Umayyad (661–749) winter resort. The palace is composed of a two-storied building with corner towers, a thermal bath, a mosque, and a monumental fountain. It represents a spectacular example of early Arab architecture with its rich mosaics, stucco decoration, and high-quality sculpture. The palace is attributed to Caliph Hisham Ibn Abd el-Malik (724–743), based on epigraphic evidence. Hisham's Palace was destroyed in a severe earthquake in 748–749. Here, Dr. Dimitri Baramki had stopped ongoing excavations due to the turbulent events that preceded the 1948 *Nakba*. My heart pounded when I read in his thesis (1953) the following line: "May the circumstances in the future permit someone eager to complete the task." I began the excavations in 2006 and completed "the task" between 2012 and 2015, together with Don Whitcomb, working in the area adjacent to the Umayyad bath and the northern area to expose the Abbasid-era (750–1258) aspects of the palace. The Palestinian-American excavations recovered the northern gate of the Umayyad palace and

explored the northern settlement that comprises an enclosure with fine masonry work and a large grape press that was contemporary with the Umayyad palace. The Abbasid remains in the northern area contain a walled settlement, a mosque, a residential unit, and a stable, indicating that the agricultural estate continued to function at a later period.

Excavations also resumed at the previously excavated sites in Sebastiya, a major urban center from the Iron Age to the Hellenistic and Roman eras. The excavations carried out by Harvard University between 1908 and 1910 under the direction of G. Reisner and C. Fisher and the joint expedition between 1931 and 1935 under the direction of J. Crowfoot revealed a substantial part of the city, including the city wall, a colonnaded street, a basilica, temples, and a theater. The new excavation focused on the rehabilitation of the site as



Sebastiya. Photo by Firas Jarrar.

an archaeological park, although the western part of the site is still in Area C. Furthermore, archaeological explorations were carried out at the site of Haram er-Rameh, identified with ancient Mamre, at the southern entrance of the city of Hebron, among many other rehabilitation works in many other sites that can be visited today.

The Department of Antiquities has documented the unfortunate deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, especially in Jerusalem, Hebron, and Nablus, since the occupation in 1967, which constituted an extension of the displacement and destruction in 1948 of more than 600 hundred Palestinian villages, with all their heritage. We

Battir. Photo courtesy of everything-everywhere.com.



also documented the damage inflicted on archaeological sites and historical buildings during successive Israeli assaults on Gaza.

A major challenge that the department has faced is the threat caused by Israeli settlements constructed in the Palestinian territories since 1967, which control more than 50 percent of the cultural resources in the West Bank and Gaza. Another significant problem is the threat posed to archaeological heritage by Israel's separation wall, including those parts that are built in and around Jerusalem. The wall separates people from their land and history and has a devastating impact on archaeological sites and the cultural landscape.

In 2005, Palestine began to draft a tentative list of world heritage sites in Palestine, including twenty sites of cultural and natural heritage. At the 2010 World Heritage Conference in Brazil, the Palestinian delegation refused to be seated until their place was marked with a plaque bearing the name of Palestine, as is the case for other country delegations. UNESCO's recognition of Palestine in 2011 was the fruit of a long struggle. It represented the first official international cultural recognition and began the process of rectifying part of the historical injustice that has befallen the Palestinian people. It also enabled the inscription on the World Heritage List of the sites of Bethlehem in 2012, the cultural landscape of Battir in 2014, and the old city of Hebron in 2017. Meanwhile, a nomination file for Tell es-Sultan has been submitted to the World Heritage Committee.

As the role of archaeology is to reconstruct the past in order to build the future, Palestinians are now contributing efforts to write an inclusive narrative of their history,

Palestine gained membership in regional organizations such as ALECSO and ISESCO in 1970 and the 1980s. In 2011 Palestine became a full member of UNESCO. However, international engagement in Palestine has taken the form of crisis management rather than offering substantive solutions to the problem of the occupation. Although the land might be divided for political reasons, history is undividable – which means that Palestine will remain the physical and moral homeland for the Palestinians.



drawing on primary sources that incorporate the voices of all peoples, groups, cultures, and religions that have lived on the land of Palestine – in stark contrast to the exclusive fantasy advanced by Zionism's settler-colonial narrative. I remain inspired by Dimitri Baramki's attestation



Community archaeology at Tell Balata.

in *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Palestine* (1969, p. 239) that all archaeological and historical evidence shows that Palestine was inhabited by many peoples, from the early times of Homo sapiens until the twentieth century, and that throughout this history – even though it was marked by many wars, invasions, and political and religious conversions – the indigenous population was never eliminated. Palestinians have always endured. This fact gives us hope in our struggle for liberation from Israel's settler-colonial occupation and the regime of apartheid that it has established in the land of Palestine.

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